

## Teaching Philosophy: Creating Community-Centered Spaces

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*(Keywords: community-centered space, relational learning, collaboration, catalyst, model of care, encouragement, agency, value, breadth, meaningful connections, space gardener)*

Space to create and discover in a community that valued me was essential to my learning as a homeschooled child. I had space and time to read many kinds of texts. I had agency to discuss and question both the content and the language with my family community. I had room to press the boundaries of my learning in a range of ways, from essays to dance performances, to arguments about house rules. Drawing from such a rich experience of early learning, **I believe my primary role as an English language teacher now is to give students the same kinds of spaces that benefitted me – spaces in which to develop as practitioners of the English language, and to fully participate as valued members in a learning community.**

According to the well-known socioculturalist theory propagated by Lev Vygotsky, learning happens when people have space to negotiate knowledge with others (Brown, 2014). I call this negotiation *relational learning*, and I believe community is the key space for this kind of learning because it is where we practice and play with what we perceive, thus forming our identities (Wenger, 1998). In the context of language learning, words themselves are inherently "relational", changing meaning depending on the social contexts in which they appear (Dryer, 2015, p.23). Thus, **I believe in giving students as much space as possible to build their knowledge of and relationship to the English language in the context of our classroom community.** Practically, this means that I design assignments that afford students room in increasing measure to co-create course materials, assessment rubrics and activities. I also structure in room for student-generated questions, and encourage students to propose their own assignments and projects in alignment with course goals. I have found that fostering the student community by empowering students to collaboratively build as many aspects of the course as possible, from daily activities to final assessments, promotes critical thinking and creativity which is central to learning and knowledge transfer, as well as a range of other benefits from student retention to increased pleasure in the learning process itself.

**As a teacher, I consider myself part of the learning community as a model learner and catalyst of the learning process.** The rise in information technology has thankfully decentered the traditional teacher-role of expert, and students often have access to ideas and content that enhance my own understanding of the world. This allows me more room to be transparent with students about my own learning processes, and to facilitate more space for the

incomes students bring to my course. I do this by getting to know my students and asking a lot of questions. By being in tune with what students bring, I am better able to work collaboratively with them to organize those structures in which learning takes on a life of its own.

My role is also to model what it means to be a member of a nurturing, and reflective learning community: I genuinely care about my students and their concerns, experiences, interests and successes. I also model for students ways to nurture respectful and caring relationships with each other, foundational to building an ethical learning community where students can be honest, take risks and engage with difficult concepts. I encourage community growth through extensive use of interactive activities, including whole-class debates, reading groups, and partnered discussions. Additionally, I am careful to ensure that the language and design of my course materials, technologies and assignments is accessible and inclusive of all communities. My definition of success is when all students can both facilitate and participate openly and thoughtfully in any class activity with minimal to zero input from me.

I would like to share a short illustration of how space to build English language in a supportive community has worked in my own classroom: I was once facilitating a class discussion around defining advanced academic vocabulary words by using personal experiences. One of the words we were defining was *fiendish*. A young Chinese-American man shared with us a powerful definition of the term by relating his own experience of fiendishness: being told to “go home” by a customer at his job in a gas station. His story resonated with the class, who responded with their own stories of racism and exclusion. It was a powerful learning, and arguably healing, experience for the entire community, myself included. The students had space to generate the content of the lesson, producing a definition that expanded everyone’s knowledge of the language and restored agency where it had been denied, as the students told their stories in a space that valued them.

***It was because the community valued them that my students could authentically share their experiences, furthering the education of all.***

By using a variety of community-centered activities to provide space for learning to come alive, I hope to inspire students to generate meaningful and relevant artifacts, including essays, pictures, and stories, that represent their unique experience of the language we discuss in class. The variety and breadth of student output that comes from relational learning in a respectful community space has made teaching a joy for me. **My principal goal as a teacher is that my students will leave my class with a greater ability to deploy English in ways that make space for their unique identities in the world, empowering them to meaningfully collaborate with others in their future communities to press the boundaries of what we know and who we are.**

## References

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If I could describe my teaching persona, this image begins to capture it. I love that this image exists.



"Space Gardener" by Nairchan

\*NOTE: I hope to draw my own rendition of this image soon.

“Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom.” – bell hooks (2012)